

Original Paper

Political Agendas for Education: From Race to the Top to Saving the Planet

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Abstract

Amidst the transition from No Child Left Behind (NCLB) to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), the book, Political Agendas for Education: From Race to the top to saving the planet by Joel Spring has discussed issues such as the impact of Race to the Top, the influence of Teach for America (TFA), teacher evaluation and merit pay, Republican reaction and rejection of Race to the Top and the education agenda of the Obama administration, and the benefits reaped by the growing for-profit industry on the United States (U.S.) education system. Simultaneously, the 5th edition has comparatively analyzed Libertarian and Green Party agendas along with the main stream political agendas which have dominated education in the U.S. Furthermore, this book has highlighted aspects of education reform which emphasize environmental sustainability, social and educational equity and freedom with the goal of human and societal health and wellbeing.

Keywords

education, education reform, education policy, political agendas

Throughout United States (U.S.) history, society has traditionally functioned as an influence of dominant power structures capitalizing on disenfranchised and invisible groups and populations (Smiley & West, 2012; Zinn, 1999). Furthermore, the intersections of race, class, gender, and the environment have regularly been excluded from mainstream social, political, and educational agendas and policy practices (Bell, 1976; Bowers, 2010; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Hiraldo, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In today's politically charged atmosphere, it is imperative for educators and pre-service teachers to remain up-to-date considering the political ideologies and issues currently faced by society and education, in order to foster a holistic approach, concerned with social justice and ecological sustainability (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Bowers, 2010; Spring, 2013). Amidst the transition from No Child Left Behind (NCLB) to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the fabricated debate over environmental sustainability and climate change, Spring's fifth edition of *Political Agendas for Education: From race to the top to saving the planet* has examined the dominant

political landscapes and ideologies that have driven and continue to shape education policy and curriculum development within the United States. As the title suggests, a central focus of the fifth edition has been its concern with what the author has called ‘the coup’ that is Race to the Top and the role Democrats for Education Reform have played in supplying its ideological and political foundation. Furthermore, this edition has comparatively analyzed aspects of the 2012 Republican, Democratic, Green, and Libertarian Party Platforms, maintaining a tone of concern for political awareness, social justice and equity, and ecological education. The topics and issues discussed within this edition run the spectrum of current politics in education, often exposing the underlying perpetuation of cause-and-effect racial and economic segregation, inequality, and injustice. For educators, researchers, and pre-service teachers interested in education reform and equality, issues related to the under-served, or simply searching for alternative ideals, this book is an essential text to explore and comprehend the main stream political perspectives, agendas, and landscapes that characterize contemporary education in the U.S.

While it has been widely agreed upon that inequality amongst schools and educational opportunities and resources has remained an issue in need of remediation (Cochran-Smith, 2003), with this edition, Spring (2013) has shed light on deeper ulterior motives that have kept the education system in the U.S. on a similar path for decades. From the lack of longitudinal research associated with current political education reforms in the U.S., to the little variation that has characterized such reforms and movements, to the inexperience of the proponents, may act to encourage the reader to question the real ulterior motives and involvement associated. In this respect, Spring has demonstrated that the agendas related to Democrats for Education Reform, Teach for America (TFA), Race to the Top, and CCSS have been largely driven by ulterior motives, similar to those of NCLB and other Republican groups which have reflected certain political and dominant perspectives while they have often failed to include any mention of the need for racial, economic, or financial equality in their suggested reform plans (Spring, 2013, p. 23). Furthermore, Spring has suggested that these major political influences and motivations have stemmed from ideological beliefs, such as the suggestion the public school system is at fault for the current income and education disparity, technology will be the saving grace, and the promise of increased profits or earnings (Spring, 2013, p. 28). As a society in the midst of the transition to the CCSS, awareness of the lack of any longitudinal research demonstrating that the current agenda will improve the academic achievement of disadvantaged students and their ability to compete in the global economy, may ignite the motivation of researchers, educators, pre-service teachers, and all other concerned citizens to question, examine, and deconstruct the political motives, assumptions, and connections that have remained influential forces on the education experience of all students and teachers (Spring, 2013, p. 22).

With this highly relevant edition, Spring (2013) has demonstrated that the dominant emergence of many political groups have put their education agendas, reforms, and ideals in direct conflict with those of many educators and leading educational researchers such as Darling-Hammond (Spring, 2013). From

President Bush's 1991 Goals 2000, to President Clinton's Educate America Act and School to Work Act, to President Bush's 2001 NCLB, to President Obama's CCSS, the push for standardization, accountability, and the human capital paradigm has persisted with limited or no longitudinal research for their basis (Spring, 2013). Furthermore, many of the current ideas and concepts related to Race to the Top, Democrats for Education Reform, TFA, CCSS, and virtually all Republican propositions have remained critical of traditional teacher preparation programs and requirements, teachers' unions, and public schools as having been a continuing detriment to society while promoting "value-added evaluation" and the idea that poverty inequality will be solved by their education platforms (Spring, 2013). Interestingly, the irony in all this seems to be that while each party has maintained their own specific ideals, Democratic and Republican policies and reforms have shown little variance as financial and political benefits for the proponents, as well as the critics, have increased exponentially.

Although a substantial portion of this book has examined the motives, backgrounds, ideals, and intersectionality related to the Republican and Democratic Parties and their connections to Charter schools, for-profit companies, investment bankers, curriculum developers, politicians, and skewed research, this edition has simultaneously brought into context the agendas of the Green and Libertarian Parties. Accordingly, Spring (2013) has presented the ideals of these two parties as important alternatives to the dominant education agendas that have characterized the U.S. education system for far too long. As a result, educators, researchers, and pre-service teachers looking to maximize "local control, emphasize civic activism, and increase the expansion of art education in order to unveil social, economic and political oppression", Green Party ideals may serve as the spark to ignite further investigation and advocacy (Spring, 2013, p. 139). However, for those comforted by an ideology concerned with the separation of school and state while "turning education over to market place forces", a Libertarian perspective may resonate more deeply (Spring, 2013, p. 139).

Throughout the last half of the book, Spring (2013) has highlighted sharp contrasts between Republican and Democratic education agendas and those of the Green and Libertarian Parties. The research and information presented in this book has demonstrated that, contrary to the alternative visions associated with the Green and Libertarian Parties, Republican concern for traditional patriotic and character education as well as the Democratic advocacy of Race to the Top ideals has remained at the forefront and driven by human capital ideals, characterized by a lack of advocacy toward activism as a means for improving social change and environment sustainability (Spring, 2013). Moreover, Spring has demonstrated that Green and Libertarian education agendas have included little or no advocacy for human capital education, high stakes testing, education standardization, and nationalism. However, unlike the Green Party's holistic vision of the relationship between humans and nature, according to Spring, the Libertarian Party has expressively touted individualism and personal liberty within a free market system. While both Green and Libertarian Parties have, in a sense, expressed concern regarding government 'dictates', such as the CCSS and advocacy toward education that would serve the interests of the economy, "the education agendas of the Green and Libertarian Parties reflect the desire for

people to have greater control over their lives” (Spring, 2013, p. 139).

Despite the fact that most leading scientists and climatologists have acknowledged pollution, climate change, and other ecological issues as affecting the future destiny of humankind (Bowers, 2010; Orr, 1993), Spring (2013) and scholars alike have pointed out that neither Republican nor Democratic Parties have displayed active concern regarding environmental education while the Libertarian agenda has continued to place these concerns in the framework of a free-market with limited or no government control (Lieberman, 2013; Stone, 2010). Building on his concern regarding the Democratic, Republican, and Libertarian agendas in the U.S. and echoing similarities and influences of those such as Frierre (1970), Zinn (2000), and Orr (1993), this edition has called for a holistic environmental curriculum that, at times, sides more closely with that of the Green Party. According to Spring, in order to ensure a long and satisfying life for humanity, an approach such as this must function in combination with: a) a constitutional amendment to ensure equal education spending, b) limited political imposition of ideas, c) the protection of languages and cultures and, d) replacement of the human capital paradigm (Spring, 2013, p. 143). Ultimately, the text concludes with placing education in the context of concern for sustainability, and environmental, social, and educational equality, in order to provide students with the equitable education they deserve.

Throughout the book, its critique has emphasized the dominance of the human capital paradigm, despite the lack of research, as it has resonated with Republican and Democratic education ideals as a cure-all for the problems or hindrances related to unemployment, the vast income and education disparity in the U.S., and global competition (Spring, 2013). In response, Spring (2013) has offered a new global paradigm, referenced from his earlier work, *A New Paradigm for Global School Systems: Education for Long Life and Happiness* which has emphasized longevity and human wellbeing. Unlike education reforms and agendas of the past, according to Spring, the paradigm referenced from his earlier work has been supported by ongoing community health and happiness research. In addition, Spring has also suggested educators interested in a possible alternative curriculum and text book look to *A New Paradigm for Global School Systems* as a means for schools and districts to provide teachers and students with the conditions necessary for enhanced and satisfying educational and life experiences (Spring, 2013, p. 146).

As a 6th year lead-teacher at a Title I school largely serving English Learners (ELs) and Doctoral student in the U.S. interested in issues related to the downtrodden, this book has left me with not only thought provoking concerns for future education, investigation and cause for action, but also with the foundational knowledge necessary to understand, navigate, and grow as an educator in this politicized terrain that is education. In doing so, this book has fostered an enhanced understanding of the backgrounds, connections, and financial gains of those involved, the ideals that characterize the Democratic, Republican, Green, and Libertarian Parties’ agendas, all the while leading to the speculation of the possible ulterior motivations behind it all. Furthermore, from one concerned citizen and educator to another, the highly relevant and eye opening propositions presented by Spring (2013)

have led me to perceive the current state of education in the U.S. with a more critical eye as there has been little evidence to suggest the human capital education goals praised by the major political parties have or will produce the desired results regarding economic growth and income disparities (Spring, 2013). Therefore, based on the information and research presented in this book, it seems reasonable to suggest that the current education agendas and policies will only perpetuate the increased economic and racial segregation and education disparity, as the for-profit corporations, politicians, private investors, and policy makers reap the financial rewards at the cost of education in the U.S. (Spring, 2013). Although Spring has impressively shed light on many faults among current education agendas, he does not suggest that his recommendations are the only answer and, in fact, has invited the reader to view his ideas and propositions as tentative with the hope that they will be refined through criticism and discussion (Spring, 2013). After reading Spring's 5th edition, it has become apparent that education reform in the U.S. must happen now. No longer can we allow corporations, investment bankers, and fat cats alike to dictate education policy and amass further wealth while our students and teachers bear the brunt; however, until a consensus is reached and our policy makers and politicians choose to listen to the voices of our educators, students, scientists, and educational researchers, rather than to the ideals of for-profit industries, human capital economists, and venture philanthropy and think tanks, the problems that plague the U.S. political education system will persist (Cochran-Smith, 2001; Scherer, 2012; Spring, 2013).

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